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AUTHOR Schwartz, Wendy
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ABSTRACT

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Young Fathers: New Support Strategies

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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YOUNG FATHERS: NEW SUPPORT STRATEGIES

There are compelling reasons to promote the involvement of fathers in their children's lives: the value of their positive influence, their effectiveness in increasing children's academic achievement, and the importance of their financial support (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Teenage and young adult males may need extra help to assume the full fatherhood role, but most, if aided, will work hard to be successful parents. Public interest in fostering fathers' involvement is increasing because of the recognized benefits of fathers' contributions to their families. In fact, the National Education Goals contain a family involvement mandate. The Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 requires states to determine paternity for 90 percent of children receiving assistance, but it also provides for family social and employment services. Indeed, the National Governors' Association recommends comprehensive statewide policies governing all aspects of teenage parenting (Stebbins, 1997).

Communities, frequently with government and school assistance, can implement programs which help youth develop into caring and responsible fathers. Father programs can be independent or components of programs designed for families, teen mothers, or young men generally. This digest briefly describes program components shown to be most effective.

Special Issues for Young Fathers

Because teenage fathers almost never plan pregnancies, their initial reactions may be denial, fear, and a desire to escape. Young fathers frequently face family rejection, barriers to contact with child and mother, a lack of ways to contribute financially, and an inability to envision future achievements enabling them to function effectively as a father. They also may believe that they are simply unwelcome and inadequate as parents (Batten & Stowell, 1996; Knitzer & Bernard, 1997). Their emotional state is further complicated by the need to reconcile the contradictory roles of adolescent and father and assume the responsibilities of adulthood before they are sufficiently mature (Kahn & Bolton, 1986).

Effective programs take account of ethnic differences and use culturally-sensitive outreach strategies and curriculum. Young fathers may need to be helped to understand that the structure of the families of their birth, heavily influenced by historical ethnic traditions and experience, may not be workable in the U.S. today. For example, Latinos, who are most responsive to warm, personal, informal contact—in their native language, if appropriate—need to consider whether an adequate family income can result from traditional gender role divisions. African Americans may feel hopeless and powerless, based on past treatment of blacks in the U.S., and may mistrust both personal counseling and agents of authority (Kiselica, 1995).

Programs also need to tailor their curriculum to the local socioeconomic climate. Urban youth, for example, need special employment counseling, given the exodus of entry-level jobs.

Program Components

Goals and Perspectives

Successful programs help young fathers develop the behaviors and assume the responsibilities common to committed parents by providing them with emotional support and useful services. Reflecting the current position of the Federal government, program goals indicate a shift in the orientation of many agencies: from solely attempting to secure child support payments to helping youth acquire fatherhood skills and increase their earning ability. Programs now seek to demonstrate that there are benefits to accepting the responsibilities of fatherhood as well as obligations (Levine, 1993; N. Tift, Fatherhood Initiative, personal communication, February 1999).

Effective counselors acknowledge the limitations of adolescent attitudes and economic realities. Possibly, they must transcend their own negative view of young fathers, based on stereotypes: they are "super studs" with only fleeting relationships with the mother, financially irresponsible, and uninterested in fatherhood (Kiselica, 1995).

Community Outreach

Program recruiters assume that fathers want to be involved. To find prospective participants, they urge mothers to supply names, encourage the youth's parents to recruit him, and go to neighborhood places where youth congregate (e.g., basketball courts). Fathers already involved with their children are recruited at birthing centers, clinics, and preschools.

To entice youth to enroll, recruiters talk about the benefits of the program, give fathers practical help at the outset, and arrange attractive, structured father-child activities. Promises of other services also help fathers to enroll: legal advice about paternity issues, empowering information about the birth process and meeting infant needs, sex education counseling and personal medical care, and mediation that leads to successful co-parenting. Offering new fathers a safe and supportive place to talk about their children and other concerns, and suggesting that program participation may give them added credibility with their children' mothers, are other recruitment strategies (Batten & Stowell, 1996; Kiselica, 1995; Simms, 1998).

Establishing trust in the program helps fathers overcome their possible fear of authority and legal responsibilities, and negative and fatalistic beliefs (Kahn & Bolton, 1986). Thus, recruiters are honest and clear about all the ways a child benefits from having an involved father and also about how hard, but uniquely satisfying, fathering is. It is beneficial for the outreach worker to share, or be familiar with, the recruit's cultural background. One effective strategy is for the first (if not all) contact to be made by another teen father who can speak from experience. Older men who have overcome the difficulties of early parenthood also recruit effectively (Tift, personal communication, February 1999; *Turning*, n.d.).

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Service Provision

Young father programs can offer many different services, ranging from on-site support to referrals (i.e., legal aid, GED courses, job training). Some offer only group activities; others, one-on-one mentoring. Some programs function as a liaison between fathers and government agencies to help men both meet their financial obligations and become eligible for public services under the 1996 Federal Act (Stebbins, 1997). The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, however, is opposed to accepting public assistance and focuses on developing self-reliance (*Turning*, n.d.). One local YWCA even produced a handbook for fathers to use, either with the program or as a stand-alone resource (Maybury, 1991).

Education. It is crucial to help fathers get as much education as possible. Thus, programs may need to act as advocates if school personnel encourage them to leave. If fathers want to drop out of school, counselors can foster persistence by building fathers' confidence that they can succeed, helping them get a job that will not interfere with schoolwork, and securing tutoring. Fathers who have already dropped out are referred to GED programs. High school graduates are encouraged to enroll in higher education as a way of increasing their long-term career and economic prospects and helping them model educational achievement for their children (Kiselica, 1995).

Parenting Education. As they explain why a father's involvement is crucial to a child's development, counselors also teach how fathers can help their children develop cognitively, socioemotionally, and physically. Equally important, they help fathers develop strategies for controlling their anger when their children misbehave and for constructively disciplining the children. Many audiovisual aids are available to demonstrate good fatherhood practices (Kiselica, 1995).

Career Development. Programs can help fathers find short-term employment to meet their child support obligations; make long-range career plans; and enroll in training programs, such as the Federal Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training. It may be necessary to provide a crash course in job-seeking and job-training skills. Fathers of color may need help in overcoming negative attitudes which, while based on historical experience, impede their chances for employment success now (Kiselica, 1995).

Counseling. Counselors help youth clarify their feelings about impending fatherhood and assuming adult responsibilities early. To help fathers feel less isolated, they provide a place for sharing feelings, asking questions, and identifying commonalities within the group. Counselors also help them develop a mature definition of masculinity so they can enjoy a healthy relationship with a woman and defer fathering additional children (Kiselica, 1995; Tift, personal communication, February 1998).

School Strategies for Fathers

Many schools have comprehensive programs for pregnant and parenting females, in which they encourage mothers to identify and involve fathers in their children's lives and to recruit them for father programs. They may invite fathers to some programs for mothers.

Some schools also implement and contribute to programs for fathers. They enable fathers to continue their general education, offer them parenting courses, and facilitate their efforts to find part-time work and make career plans.

Kiselica (1995) has identified several schools and districts with programs for both parents. The ***Booker T. Washington Alternative School*** (Terre Haute, IN) permits parents to finish their education, access low-cost child care services, and hold jobs. The ***Jefferson County Public Schools*** Teen Parent Program (KY) identifies and involves fathers prenatally, and helps them set and realize goals. The ***New Futures School*** (Albuquerque, NM) is a collaboration among education and social service agencies and the University of New Mexico Medical School that provides parents with a range of services. The ***Boulder Valley Schools Teen Parenting Program*** (CO) also offers services for both parents (Parmerlee-Greiner, 1992).

Conclusion

The benefits to children, families, and society of the commitment of fathers are undisputed. Therefore, it is worth the time and effort of schools and community organizations to implement programs for young fathers that will enable them to develop into responsible adults, meet their obligations, and create a generation of well-nurtured and effectively educated children.

—Wendy Schwartz, Teachers College, Columbia University

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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